

C O N F I D E N T I A L SANAA 003070

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH SPEAKER OF PARLIAMENT
SHEIKH AL-AHMAR

Classified By: DCM Nabeel Khoury for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Ambassador paid a courtesy call on Speaker of Parliament and head of the Islah opposition party Abdullah al-Ahmar on December 11. Al-Ahmar refused to address pressing domestic issues, including much-needed economic reforms, Parliament's agenda, and Islah's political agenda, instead insisting that the Palestine and Iraq are "the biggest and most important" issues facing the Yemeni People.

¶2. (C) The 71-year-old leader of the Hashid tribal federation, the largest and most powerful northern federation of which Saleh is a member, appeared relatively well, having just returned to Sanaa after almost a yearlong absence from the scene for medical treatment. Ambassador asked the Sheikh for his views on pressing economic reforms, issues before Parliament, and for his thoughts on how Yemen could most benefit from U.S. cooperation and assistance. Al-Ahmar preferred to discuss regional issues, characterizing U.S.-ROYG relations as "good" but, as for the Yemeni people, "their most important concern is the Palestinian problem," and they blame the U.S.

¶3. (C) Ambassador said the U.S. is fully committed to a two state solution and resumption of the peace process, adding that it is difficult to believe that the biggest problem facing the average Yemeni citizen is the situation in Palestine. "It is," relied al-Ahmar, "and it is the reason for terrorism."

¶4. (C) Ambassador raised President Saleh's BMENA participation and the ROYG's commitment to regional leadership on democratic reform. Not taking the bait, al-Ahmar replied that the friendliness of Arab leaders toward the United States is not genuine but based on their fear of American power. Ambassador asked the Sheikh if that was true for Yemen. "Its true for all Arab Governments," replied the Sheikh, "except maybe Jordan," which is a U.S.-British creation. Al-Ahmar conceded that the U.S. can play a positive role in Yemen through economic aid, but advised that a change in regional policy would go much further with the street. "It is better to gain the respect of the people than that of their rulers," he said.

Comment

¶5. (C) Al-Ahmar appeared well, putting to rest numerous rumors circulated about supposed amputations and dire health. His posture at the start of the meeting was stiff, but loosened up as it went on. He stressed at the end that despite his criticisms, he favored a dynamic dialogue with the USG. Al-Ahmar is more a tribal leader and entrenched member of the Yemeni Establishment than Parliamentarian or opposition figure. He is a major stakeholder in the status quo, an importer of arms, and a leader in the oil and gas services industry; his leadership of the Islamic opposition, perhaps by design, practically ensures that Parliamentary challenges to the Executive as well as his party's agenda will be measured and limited. End Comment.

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